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PRINCIPLES OF Parenting

Now That We're **Divorced**, How Can We **Parent** Together?

Perhaps you and your marriage partner experienced problems too difficult to overcome, and you chose to divorce. Getting a divorce through the legal system does not mean you break all ties with one another. You probably have to deal with each other on a number of issues, including matters concerning your children.



Why should divorced parents try to get along with each other?

It is often hard for divorced parents to separate the angry feelings they have toward one another from their duties as parents. However, one of the most helpful things you can do to help your children is to put away your anger and cooperate in parenting.

It is important for children to know they will continue to be loved by both parents. Divorce is almost always hard for children, but when both parents take time to support and love them, the children are less likely to have major problems from the divorce. When ex-spouses fight each other, the children often display behavior problems, have poor relationships with their friends, and have difficulty performing in school.

Divorced parents can cooperate in parenting whether one parent has full custody of the children or whether the parents have joint custody. As divorced parents, you do not have to agree on everything concerning your children. But you should not allow the children to be drawn into your disagreements.

As divorced parents, you will be better able to cooperate in parenting when:

- Both of you decide to do whatever is best for your children. This normally includes allowing the children contact with both parents. If child support payments are part of the divorce agreement, they should be made in full, on time, and without argument.
- You respect one another's right to share in parenting the children. The two of you may not like one another, but cooperation means recognizing that the children need a relationship with both of you.
- You try to reach an agreement about some basic parenting rules. You don't have to agree on everything, but you should be consistent in enforcing rules.

- You let go of angry feelings you may have for one another and work together to parent your children in a warm, loving manner.

It may be difficult for divorced parents to work together because one of the parents was abusive, because one parent now lives far away, because child support is not being paid, or because the ex-spouses are still angry with each other. It is not easy to deal with these difficulties.

What if there are serious problems?

If you think your ex-spouse is abusing the children, go immediately to the Department of Children's Services (DCS) or local law enforcement. If your belief is accurate, the caseworker will take appropriate action to protect the children. Do not let your worry about abuse keep you angry. If abuse has occurred, make sure you and your child get professional counseling. When there has been abuse, decisions about a child's future contact with the abusing parent should be made with the help of appropriate professionals such as DCS caseworkers.

Except in cases where a danger has been recognized by a DCS caseworker or other professional, it is important for children to stay in contact with both parents. If one parent lives in another town, that parent can send letters or make phone calls to the child. The child can send the parent



school papers and drawings. The custodial parent should keep the other parent up to date on the child's activities, interests, and health.

If the parent who lives away does not show interest in maintaining contact, then the custodial parent may want to seek support from others such as extended family and friends. These others can help the children feel that many people care about them. Children develop best when surrounded by people who love them.

When one parent remains angry after the divorce, there is no simple answer. Most divorced parents become less angry over time. However, there are a few who remain bitter and keep trying to pick fights. If this happens, the parent who is trying to get along should not fight back. Instead, it is best to keep conversations to a minimum, discuss how to help the children, and avoid areas of disagreement. It may be helpful to call a minister or a counselor to advise in dealing with an angry ex-spouse. No one really wins a fight between ex-spouses. And children are the big losers.

You can help your children adjust to the divorce.

When possible, it is good to have both parents talk to the children together, and then with each child individually, so that each child's needs are addressed.

There are two topics that need to be discussed. Children

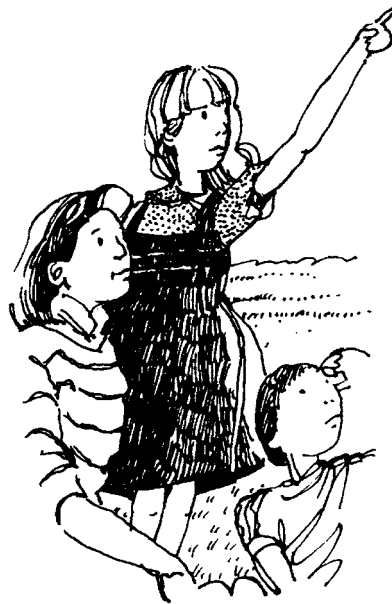


should be reassured that when they were born the parents loved one another and that both parents wanted them. Newly divorced people may feel that they never really loved each other. And sometimes the parents were not happy at first about a pregnancy. But it is best when the parents can recognize, and tell the children, that there was once love between them and that they were glad to have each child. This knowledge can help children feel cared for and begin to realize that they are not responsible for the divorce.

Second, children need to know that, regardless of where they live, the absent parent will continue to love them and will not abandon them. Children should be told when they can expect to see the absent parent, and then the adults should hold to the schedule. Consistency helps children feel safe. One way to reassure children of visits is to make two identical calendars — with the help of both parents — with notes indicating visit dates. Then the children can keep one calendar and the absent parent the other.

Parents can help the children learn to accept the fact that the parents are not going to live together again. It is normal that the children will feel grief about the separation of their parents. Children should be encouraged to express their feelings. Parents can help the children share their feelings in appropriate ways. Physical activities or hobbies may provide a way for children to release anger they have for one or both parents. Children may feel better if they are allowed to cry when they are sad. Parents should answer their children's questions honestly and not criticize them for asking.

Notice when one of the children feels especially sad or angry. Take time to do things together.



Help the child have fun with familiar friends. Additional ideas about effective parenting and helping children deal with their feelings can be found in other publications in this series, *Principles of Parenting*.

While children are learning to cope with the divorce, it may be better to delay making any other changes such as moving, changing schools, or changing babysitters. Parents should work with the children's teachers and others who are in close contact so that everyone can help the children learn to feel safe and to express feelings about the divorce.

Children can and do adjust to divorce. It often takes about two years to recover. Parents can help children deal with their feelings of sadness, anger, fear, and guilt. Here is a list to help you help your children. Mark the items you have already discussed with your children and that they seem to be comfortable with. Then complete the other items, and mark them off as you go. Everything may not need to be said at one time. If you continue to bring up these topics for discussion at appropriate times, your children will get the message that it's okay to talk about what's bothering them. Then they may bring up some of the topics themselves.

___ 1. Divorce has occurred, and the children did not cause it. They could not have prevented it.

___ 2. The parents loved each other when the children were born and both wanted the children.

___ 3. Both parents still love them and will continue to be a part of their lives.

___ 4. Children do not have to choose between parents. Living arrangements have been discussed. The children know who will live where and when. Children know they will spend time with both parents.

___ 5. Parents may still have some disagreements from time to time. These disagreements are between the parents, and the children do not have to take sides.

___ 6. The children may be upset and confused sometimes. They will have feelings such as sadness, fear, guilt, hurt, or anger. The parents will be there to listen anytime they need to talk about these feelings.

___ 7. The children may feel embarrassed about the divorce. They understand that it is okay to tell their friends about the divorce; it is not a secret, and they are not bad for talking about it.

___ 8. Rules may be different with each parent. The children know what the basic rules are for each home.

You can help yourself adjust to the divorce.

It is important that you as the parent learn to cope with the divorce. Recognize that sadness, anger, hurt, fear, loneliness, and relief are normal reactions to the divorce. It takes time to adjust to any painful separation.

You may experience a variety of mental, emotional, and physical reactions to the divorce. At times you may feel isolated or out of touch with reality. You may feel disbelief that the marriage is over, embarrassment, anger, confusion, helplessness, depression,

and self-blame. You may hope for a reunion. You may ask "why" over and over, and your self-esteem may suffer. You may experience changes in sleeping and eating habits or increases in alcohol or drug use.

Some people even have thoughts of suicide. If this happens to you, be sure to call a professional counselor or a minister with excellent counseling skills. Do not keep it a secret if you are feeling suicidal. Get help fast.

It commonly takes about two years to adjust to a divorce. There may be times when you feel relieved about the changes you have made. For instance, making new friends or going out on dates may make you happy that a bad marriage ended. At other times, such as during holidays, you may be sad. Hearing about the former spouse's remarriage can cause you to feel sad. If you have custody of your children, you may also feel overloaded with responsibilities. Absent parents may miss being with their children on a daily basis.

Changes continue for a long time after separation. Eventually, divorced persons do adjust, and their self-esteem may increase as they start a new life. If you find that the pain is unbearable or if it continues more than two years, you should seek support and help from a minister or counselor.

It may help you adjust to your divorce if you talk about your

feelings to other adults, especially those who have also been divorced. You may need to ask family members for help. Maybe they can help you with childcare and meal preparation from time to time. Find someone at work who understands your situation in case an emergency arises and you need to talk.

Exercise. Take good care of yourself. Develop new talents by taking classes or developing hobbies. Do fun things with family or friends. Have the older children take on some of the household chores such as planning meals and making beds. Take a parenting class to help you learn new skills.

Finances can be a big problem after a divorce, especially for the custodial parent who is not working or is working at a lower-paying job. It may be necessary to get the help of a financial counselor.

What are the most important things to remember?

Children need both parents. Divorced parents can learn how to adjust to a divorce, get along with one another, and cooperate in loving their children. In order for former spouses to work together as parents, they must help their children — as well as themselves — adjust to the divorce. It is normal for all family members to experience a wide range of emotions. But families can cope with divorce. Many have found

counseling, parenting classes, support groups, and reading to help them reorganize their daily lives after divorce.

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If your children want to learn —

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